DOMESTIC SERVICE AND CLASS RELATIONS IN BRITAIN 1900–1950*

Far from being symbols of a bygone era, servants remain central to life in modern Britain. One in ten British households currently employs domestic workers.[1] The 'disappearance' of service — already heralded in the 1920s, when press coverage of 'the servant problem' was filled with nostalgic laments for the faithful Victorian maid — never happened. Change, of course, did occur — the live-in housemaid of the 1900s was replaced with the part-time cleaner of the 1950s — and it is that transition on which I focus here. I therefore treat the history of twentieth-century domestic service as one of development, rather than decline. Moreover, I argue that relations between servants and their employers illuminate the important and dynamic role that class has played in modern British history — though we would not know it from the silence on service that characterizes the major historical studies of class in twentieth-century Britain.[2]

This article builds on existing histories of domestic service by moving beyond the polarization of socio-economic and cultural history. Between the 1960s and the 1980s sociologists and social historians were preoccupied with whether 'deference' or 'defiance' shaped servants' behaviour and actions. While some scholars argued that servants were socialized into unquestioning obedience,[3] others suggested that deference in fact masked covert defiance.[4] Both groups used close analysis of the interaction

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[1] Work Foundation, *Domestics: UK Domestic Workers and their Reluctant Employers* (London, 2004), 2.

[2] Domestic service is not mentioned in David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 1998); its decline is mentioned in passing in Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 109.

[3] Leonora Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Jl Social Hist.*, vii (1974); Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin, 1975); P. Taylor, 'Daughters and Mothers — Maids and Mistresses: Domestic Service between the Wars', in J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson (eds.), *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London, 1979).

[4] Howard Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xvii (1975).

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between servants and their employers to place them within an existing paradigm of class relations.[5] Most of these studies agreed that domestic service had 'disappeared' by the 1950s, largely because young working-class women found the occupation oppressive and left when job opportunities increased in factories, shops and offices.[6] The recent insights of cultural historians have challenged this older methodology and the conclusions derived from it. Judy Giles and Lucy Delap have used middle-class women's writing and, in Delap's case, servants' memoirs, to suggest that service was a positive experience for many working-class women.[7] These different strands of scholarship have produced immensely valuable work, but none has successfully explained the coexistence of servants' and former servants' positive testimonies with the replacement of 'live-in' service by part-time domestic work after the Second World War.

In seeking to provide such an explanation, this article contributes to an emergent approach to modern domestic service heralded by the work of Carolyn Steedman and Alison Light.[8] Steedman's conclusions are drawn from the very different period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, I concur with her argument that we need to rewrite the history of the working class to place servants at the centre, rather than at the margins, of this narrative. Light's study concentrates on the first half of the twentieth century. Like Steedman, she attributes to servants far greater emotional depth than did the earlier deference/defiance approach, while giving more consideration to socio-economic context, and to class, than other recent cultural histories. However, Light's work centres on the small number of servants who worked for the so-called Bloomsbury group of writers and artists, particularly those employed by Virginia Woolf. This was in many ways an

[5] This approach has influenced international research on, and representations of, workers who are not engaged in industrial commodity production: see, for example, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

[6] See, for example, Theresa M. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820–1920* (London, 1976).

[7] Lucy Delap, 'Patsy Pancake to Mrs Mopp: Domestic Service Humour in Britain', unpubd research paper given to the Annual Conference of the Social History Society, University of Exeter, 30 Mar. 2007; Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004), 79–83.

[8] Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007); Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London, 2007).

exceptional coterie of upper-middle-class employers. I develop the insights provided by Steedman and Light in a study of a far wider range of households than those Light covers. I also use the words of servants themselves — drawn from sixty archived life histories and published autobiographies that cover England, Wales, and Southern Scotland — rather than relying on employers' testimonies, as Steedman and Light frequently have to do.

This methodology shapes four arguments that I deal with in turn. The first section of the article demonstrates that domestic service is fundamental to the modern history of work, and that the change from residential to part-time service has a primarily economic explanation. Next, I argue that the significance of domestic service for class relations has been neglected because servants are not engaged in commodity production and rarely participate in the organized labour movement. In the third section, I challenge the marginalization of servants within studies of the working class: I highlight that servants' lack of loyalty, made starkly clear by the alacrity with which most of them accepted alternative jobs in expanding sectors, exacerbated class antagonism during the first half of the twentieth century; and, in so doing, I argue that detachment provides a more useful means of conceptualizing servants' relationships with their employers than deference or defiance. The final section of the article examines the significance of service for modern gender relations, demonstrating that middle-class support for service has reinforced a gendered division of labour within the home and labour market.

I

Domestic service defined a formative life stage for many women between 1900 and 1950. One in three women in paid employment worked as servants in 1901, and roughly one in four during the inter-war years, but many more women experienced service at some point in their lives, generally during their youth: almost 50 per cent of servants were young women, aged under twenty-five. These young women tended to be unmarried; most left service as soon as they wed. Up to the Second World War, most of this group lived in their employers' homes, enduring long working hours and few holidays (generally only Sundays plus one half-day per fortnight, and a week's annual unpaid leave). Residential service declined during the 1940s, but still accounted for over 10 per

cent of all women in paid employment in 1951. By this time, however, over 70 per cent of women in paid employment were married. Most worked as part-time chars and cleaners.[9] This pattern of employment continues to shape domestic work today.

The reason for the decline of residential domestic service was, in Robert Roberts's view, simply explained by young women's desire for 'freedom — above all, freedom to meet men easily', granted by the proliferation of mill, factory and shop jobs for women after the First World War.[10] The government anxiously concurred: 'They want more freedom and limited hours of work', concluded the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry in 1919.[11] The number of servants fell from 1,459,884 in 1901 to 1,335,389 in 1921.[12] Most young factory or shop workers worked for less than fifty hours per week by the 1920s; servants regularly put in more than seventy. However, the post-war expansion of jobs was not sufficient to allow all these young women to escape servitude. As late as 1942, a Ministry of Labour investigation identified many cases of teenage servants working in excess of twelve hours per day, including twenty-nine Devon servants working between fifty and ninety hours per week.[13]

Servants who lived at home, rather than with their employer, did not usually fare any better. Mrs Sandys grew up in Bury, Lancashire, the eldest daughter of an unskilled transport worker and a mother who took in washing. She had six siblings, three younger than her. In 1927, at the age of fourteen, she was

[9] *Census 1951, England and Wales: Occupation Tables* (London, 1956), table 3; *Census 1951, Scotland*, iv, *Occupations and Industries* (Edinburgh, 1956), table 1.

[10] Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Hardmondsworth, 1973), 222. I have documented the experiences of shop assistants, factory hands and clerks in Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918–1950* (Oxford, 2005).

[11] *Report of the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry*, Parliamentary Papers, 1919 (Cmd 135), xxxi, pp. 99–100; Ministry of Labour, 'Average Hours and Earnings Enquiry', Oct. 1938, July 1943, July 1945, Oct. 1948, *Ministry of Labour Gazette* (1939, 1944, 1946, 1948); *The Social Survey of Merseyside*, ed. D. Caradog Jones, 3 vols. (Liverpool, 1934), ii, 316.

[12] *Census of England and Wales, 1901: Occupation Tables* (London, 1903); *Census of England and Wales, 1921*: *Occupations* (London, 1924), table 4; *Eleventh Decennial Census of the Population of Scotland, 1901*, ii (London, 1903); *Census of Scotland, 1921*, iii, *Occupations and Industries* (Edinburgh, 1924), table 2.

[13] National Archives, London, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), ED 124/49.

engaged as a maid by the local vicar's wife. 'They lived in a flat . . . and I could not sleep in there so I had to go daily, and when I say daily I mean seven days a week, with a half-day off. I had to be there at eight o'clock in the morning and usually was home by about eight o'clock in the evening'.[14] Mrs Sandys could not recall what she was paid — many employers paid the parents directly when a girl was that young — but in 1931 Middlesbrough's Local Education Authority found that 'of 808 full-time day [servant] girls investigated . . . 47 per cent received from 2s to 5s per week and 89 per cent received under 10s a week'.[15] This investigation covered girls aged between fourteen and twenty, some with several years' employment experience. By contrast, those girls who entered shop or factory work could expect to earn about 11 shillings per week at fourteen, and over 20 shillings per week by the age of twenty.[16]

Yet middle-class householders did not, on the whole, have to do without servants in the 1920s and 1930s; working-class poverty meant that the War Cabinet's concerns in 1919 failed to materialize. Depression in the early 1920s and again from 1929, allied to the slow rate of expansion of light manufacturing, meant that the number of servants increased over the course of the 1920s, reaching 1,554,235 in 1931.[17] Edith Edwards, who grew up in Macclesfield in Cheshire, stressed that she only entered domestic service in 1929 because 'we were very, very poor'.[18] She had wanted to become a clerk, but her father was dead and the only money coming into the household was provided by her mother's multiple cleaning jobs. This was not enough to pay for Edith to have a secondary education or vocational training.

[14] Tameside Local Studies Library, Ashton-under-Lyne (hereafter TLSL), Manchester Studies Tapes Collection (hereafter MSTC), no. 9.

[15] Parliamentary question asked on 17 Oct. 1934, noted in PRO, LAB 98/29, unpubd, untitled memorandum, n.d., *c.*1934–8.

[16] Ministry of Labour, *Standard Time Rates of Wages and Hours of Labour in Great Britain and Northern Ireland at 31st August 1929* (London, 1929). On wages and earnings more generally, see Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England*, 27–9.

[17] *Census of England and Wales, 1921: Occupations*, table 4; *Census of England and Wales, 1931: Occupations* (London, 1934), table 3; *Census of Scotland, 1921*, iii, *Occupations and Industries*, table 2; *Census of Scotland, 1931*, iii, *Occupations and Industries* (Edinburgh, 1934), table 1.

[18] TLSL, MSTC, no. 36.

High adult male unemployment in the early 1920s and again in the period 1929–32 meant that many daughters were vulnerable to the same pressures as Edith, particularly since alternative occupations for women were still very limited in the depressed, heavy industrial regions. Servants' low wages were partially explained by the provision of bed and board, an attraction for those young women who could not find well-paid work near their parental homes, and whose families could barely afford to put food on the table.[19] Young women made up the largest proportion of workers to be transferred out of the depressed areas to employment in other regions under a Ministry of Labour scheme that ran from 1927 to 1937 (the penalty for refusing to participate was loss of unemployment benefit). They were an attractive constituency because they were so easy to place: over 80 per cent of them were sent into domestic service.[20]

This representation of domestic service as sustained by poverty and government coercion is at odds with the pattern of parental pressure presented in most existing histories. Taylor argued that many working-class mothers wanted their daughters to enter service, even when other forms of employment were available, because it socialized girls into class and gender subordination.[21] Light's recent study offers a more balanced account but also emphasizes that 'parents' word was law'.[22] Certainly, this was the case for some. Mrs Sandys recalled that:

> I always considered that I was put into service as a punishment . . . for the simple reason that I was a tomboy. I did not respond to discipline very well at home. My Mother had been in service . . . and she used to threaten me that she would put me in service, but I never took the threat seriously, but the day I was fourteen arrived and I ran home from school as quickly as I could and dashed in and said to Mother, 'I don't have to go to school any more, do I?' And she said, 'No, you are going to Mrs Wright's [the local vicar's wife] tomorrow morning'.[23]

In some rural areas, domestic service was considered healthier, safer and more 'respectable' than factory work. Marion Kent grew up in rural Derbyshire in the 1920s: 'there was only factory

[19] Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984), 64–5.

[20] *Ministry of Labour: Report for the Year 1938*, Parliamentary Papers, 1938–9 (Cmd 6016), xii.

[21] Taylor, 'Daughters and Mothers — Maids and Mistresses'.

[22] Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, 281, 299.

[23] TLSL, MSTC, no. 9.

or domestic service work available, and my mother, well, domestic service was a bit cleaner, she didn't want me in a factory'.[24]

Crucially, however, servants like Marion Kent and Mrs Sandys knew that their parents were not choosing domestic service positively, but as the lesser of two evils, if they operated any choice at all. They entered service not because it provided excellent training for marriage or motherhood (though that was one way of rationalizing the demands it made on a young girl), but because the parents needed their daughter to 'get her feet under someone else's table', as former servant Winifred Foley put it.[25] In her case, there *was* no choice — girls could not find regular work in the Forest of Dean village she called home.

The *powerlessness* that parents felt is expressed in many servants' testimonies. 'I don't have to tell thee how much your mam and I wish we could kip thee at 'ome', Winifred Foley's father told her the day before she entered service in the late 1920s. 'Now mind what I do say: if they do work thee too 'ard, or not give thee enough vittles . . . we'll scrape the money up some'ow to get thee wum'.[26] Such testimonies remind us that the transition from school to employment frequently sharpened a girl's sense of her class, often negatively. But there were limits to parental stoicism. Mrs Sandys's mother eventually removed her daughter from service when she was made to work while she had a bad cold:

> I remember her taking me out of the wash house and very brusquely saying, 'Where is Mrs Wright?' I just said, 'She is in bed not very well.' And she ignored that and went off . . . mother came down and dragged me out and said, 'Go upstairs and pack your case, you are going home.' I remember having a very guilty conscience leaving all that work behind . . . I heard mother telling other people, 'She was using my girl for a slave and none of my girls will slave as hard as I have slaved'.[27]

Mrs Sandys subsequently took part-time cleaning jobs and was eventually able to train as a nurse once her younger siblings were earning their keep.

The Second World War marked the end of residential domestic service as a major employer, but not the end of domestic work. By 1951 domestic service occupied only 5 per cent of female workers aged under twenty-five, while clerical work, in which only 12 per

[24] Lancashire Record Office, Preston (hereafter LRO), North West Sound Archive (hereafter NWSA), 1988.0060.
[25] Winifred Foley, *A Child in the Forest* (London, 1974), 141.
[26] *Ibid.*, 150.
[27] TLSL, MSTC, no. 9.

cent of young women workers had been engaged twenty years previously, was now their largest employer. But the maids of the 1920s returned as chars and cleaners, of whom there were 238,863 in 1951. They took up this work for the same reason that they had entered employment in their teens: family need. Winifred Foley became a char in London during the 1940s to supplement her husband's wages.[28] By the 1960s, more families could live on a single adult's wage than had been the case forty years earlier, but married women's earnings were crucial to larger households or those lacking a wage-earning male, and were also important to families aspiring to the fruits of affluence: holidays abroad, car or television ownership.[29]

In exploiting the earning opportunities available, this generation of married women deliberately lessened economic dependence on their sons or daughters, opening up a new range of possibilities for post-war teenagers. They paid for their daughters to stay on at school, or to undertake apprenticeships in occupations like hairdressing.[30] As the *Daily Mirror* asserted in 1950: 'Working-class parents do not want "white coat" jobs for their daughters — they want "white collar" jobs . . . domestic work and the like is not good enough for THEIR daughters'.[31] Domestic workers remained vital to the economic condition of the working class: they provided crucial supplements to industrial workers' wages just as they had done before the Second World War; they also changed earning patterns, and made new forms of leisure and working possible for themselves, their families, and particularly for their teenage children.

II

Servants lived by their labour; their social position was defined by it, their daily lives shaped by this reality. In a general Marxian sense, then, they were working-class. Why, then, have they been excluded from histories of the working class? Steedman has

[28] Winifred Foley, *Back to the Forest* (London, 1981), 6.
[29] John H. Goldthorpe *et al.*, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge, 1969), 98, 129.
[30] Pearl Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London, 1948), 129; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, revised edn (Harmondsworth, 1962), 177–9.
[31] *Daily Mirror*, 3 Jan. 1950, 7.

identified the major reason: their exclusion from modern labour theory, explained by their involvement with reproduction rather than commodity production. As a consequence, Adam Smith defined servants' labour as 'not-work'; Marx marginalized them, and they are neglected in social historical narratives of modern Britain, including E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.[32]

There are two other reasons. The first is servants' neglect by the labour movement. Other groups of workers fall outside modern labour theory, but clerks and shop assistants formed unions, influenced the Labour Party and find their way into history that way. Servants did not. These lackeys of the rich were not attractive to trade unions, and few of them were adult men, the traditional constituency of the labour movement, not least because they generally had the time to organize themselves. By the inter-war years, the labour movement was becoming more receptive to the value of organizing unskilled women workers, but it was far easier to organize in a shop or an office than to create a union of domestic workers, isolated from each other in private households.[33]

The second reason is the domestic setting of service. A pamphlet produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1919 stressed that:

> The moment we turn to the domestic problem we find that our workers do not work to produce wealth . . . Moreover, the relations between domestic workers and their employers are primarily and inevitably personal . . . It is thus impossible in disputes between maids and mistresses to attempt to find a solution on lines that would be applicable to miners or factory girls.[34]

Subsequent inquiries into the 'problem' of servant recruitment and retention concluded that wages and working conditions 'are and must remain questions . . . of the personal relationship between employer and staff'.[35] Published histories, too, emphasize the affective relations between employers and servants. Older studies of the deference/defiance school focus on the

[32] Steedman, *Master and Servant*, 29–43.

[33] On the difficulties of organizing such workers, see Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England*, ch. 6.

[34] Ministry of Reconstruction, *Domestic Service* (Reconstruction Pamphlet 22, London, 1919), 14.

[35] Ministry of Labour, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Present Conditions as to the Supply of Female Domestic Servants* (London, 1923), 13.

interpersonal relationships between maid and mistress or master in order to describe and analyse oppression and servants' responses to this.[36] Cultural histories, too, focus on the emotional attachments between maids and mistresses, demonstrating that mutual loyalty and affection could exist.[37] This approach is beneficial in emphasizing the historical specificity of class relations. However, as the following section of this article argues, it neglects the importance of pay and working conditions in shaping social relationships between servants and employers, and servants' views of their employment.

At best, this approach leaves unchallenged the assumption that domestic service remains outside modern class relations. In subsequent sections of this article, I argue that they were integral to the working class. Servants' aspirations and actions were shaped by their own recognition that they had to rely on their labour and that this distinguished them from their employers. Their responses to this were often individualistic, and rarely challenged class inequalities. But these women nonetheless found a means of negotiating such inequalities in ways that proved threatening to middle-class lifestyles and remind us that class relations are never static or entirely stable.

III

No single model for managing servants existed. In some larger, wealthier households the relationship between servant and employer continued to be characterized by paternalism and deference: in Lady Muriel Beckwith's words, there was 'a curiously close and unwritten law of obligation and affection . . . [and] dependence one on the other'.[38] However, deferential relations simultaneously emphasized social difference, through, for example, the obligation on servants to be neither seen nor heard when cleaning, or the changing of their name to reflect their status.[39] Edith Lockwood worked as a servant in the decade before the First World War. She had fond memories of her upper-class

[36] Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life'; Taylor, 'Daughters and Mothers — Maids and Mistresses'.

[37] Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, ch. 4; Delap, 'Patsy Pancake to Mrs Mopp'.

[38] Muriel Beckwith, *When I Remember* (London, 1936), 68.

[39] See, for example, Scottish Oral History Archive, Stirling Women's Oral History Archive, U3.

employer, who 'was very nice . . . If we weren't so well she — always said we were to lie down'. Nevertheless, her mistress 'didn't call me Edith . . . because she had a friend called Edith so she called me Annie'.[40] Edith Edwards's first job was as a kitchen maid in a wealthy Macclesfield household that boasted a large staff. She had little to do with her employers — her work was supervised by the cook — and she enjoyed a two-hour break each afternoon and excellent food. But she was in no doubt about her status. When her employer entered the kitchens 'she ignored me — yes, yes and the family, you know, you were — used to feel, down here, yes'.[41] Such strategies created a physical and social distance that emphasized the household's hierarchy.

Many former servants' positive memories of their employment are derived not from daily interaction with their employers, but from material provision and working conditions. Mrs Hopwood, the daughter of a gardener, worked as parlour maid for a doctor for six years after her fourteenth birthday in 1907. She enjoyed the 'lovely food' and was proud of the 'very good send off' a subsequent employer gave her when she got married; the 'gentleman' of the house bought her wedding dress.[42] Mrs Cleary trained as a confectioner in 1918, but there were few jobs available in her native Cheshire and she became servant to a doctor's family known to her mother. It was a disappointment, but when she went for interview 'the parlourmaid opened the door to me — this stands out in my memory very well — and . . . I thought — she looked lovely and I thought, oh I'd love to look like that . . . pretty lace apron — and cap and everything'. The food 'was gorgeous, I mean the huge joints and the large meals they had — and we used to have the same . . . I got fat'.[43] In the 1930s, Mrs Halliday fell in love with 'the beautiful bottle green dresses' her doctor employer provided.[44]

Households that employed one or two 'general' servants had always been more common than those large, upper-class households employing a whole hierarchy of staff. This trend was exacerbated by the decline of the aristocracy in the first decades of

[40] ESDS Qualidata Archive, University of Essex, Colchester (hereafter Qualidata), Family Life and Work Experience collection (hereafter FLWE), no. 129.
[41] TLSL, MSTC, no. 36.
[42] Qualidata, FLWE, no. 42.
[43] TLSL, MSTC, no. 28.
[44] LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088.

the twentieth century.[45] Servant-keeping was widely viewed as one of the distinctions between the working and middle classes by the early twentieth century, even if servants themselves were excluded from definitions of the working class.[46] Work could be very hard in single-servant households. Mrs Hopwood entered service at the age of fourteen, in 1907. Over the next fifteen years she worked as a maid in several households. She found work far harder in those houses where she was the only maid: 'the general servant . . . they were always made to feel that, well they used to call them lackeys . . . they were at everyone's beck and call'.[47]

This workload was lessened in those households where a mistress worked alongside their servant, as was the case in many smaller artisan and middle-class households before the First World War. Mrs Jaggard was general servant in a schoolmaster's house during the 1900s, when she was in her teens. She ate meals with the family and her mistress 'used to help herself a good deal, she used to clear the breakfast table . . . [and] do her own bedroom'.[48] As late as the 1930s, Winifred Foley worked for a middle-class housewife who 'was my mistress and my employer — but . . . she was also a bit of a Momma to me'.[49] As Foley suggests, living with a family, working alongside one's mistress, did not mean a servant forgot that the basis of this relationship was economic. Mrs Cleary's employers were 'very kind — and very patronizing you know, I'm a lady and you're a maid sort of thing — but they were very kind'.[50]

By the inter-war period, though, the relationship described by Foley was becoming rare. She was the only one of the forty inter-war servants whose testimonies have been drawn on here who recalls her mistress sharing the workload. This was partly because artisan households ceased employing full-time servants, but working-class households might still employ very poor women to help the wife and mother of the house with big tasks such as

[45] David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London, 1990), 341–4, 697–709.
[46] Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 3rd edn, 9 vols. (London, 1892–7), viii, 214; H. Llewellyn Smith, *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, 9 vols. (London, 1930–5), viii, 315; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 44–5.
[47] Qualidata, FLWE, no. 42.
[48] Qualidata, FLWE, no. 17.
[49] Winifred Foley, *The Forest Trilogy* (Oxford, 1992), 219.
[50] TLSL, MSTC, no. 28.

laundry.[51] However, divisions between the working and middle class also seem to have become more rigid, with middle-class women's role becoming more starkly demarcated from that of their working-class maids.

Existing cultural histories have ascribed this growing separation between servants and employers to middle-class anxiety over dealing with their maids.[52] Smaller houses meant the middle class were more aware of the servants' presence — their smell, their sneers, their laughter; maids were in the next room now, not below stairs.[53] In an age of social mobility, so the argument goes, many among the expanding middle class felt it important to employ servants to distinguish themselves from the working class. At the same time, few of them had a family history of servant-keeping, and becoming an employer was thus a source of great insecurity.[54] Evidence for this is drawn from a few selected middle-class women writers and prescriptive domestic manuals aimed at servants' employers. A Ministry of Reconstruction leaflet of 1919 lamented:

> The present-day gulf between mistress and maid is largely due to the growth of extreme luxury in the very rich, and the consequent attempt to copy their ways by the rest of the country. It is really quite modern and rather vulgar. The great ladies of past generations took pride in supervising the care of old glass and china . . . Their servants looked on service with them as a career for life.[55]

Another source for this line of argument is provided by Celia Fremlin, the Oxford graduate who took up servant work in the late 1930s and wrote up her experiences in *The Seven Chars of Chelsea*. Fremlin answered an advertisement for a general servant, and reported in her subsequent book that the 'lower middle class' mistress of the house had answered the door with some anxiety,

[51] Pat Ayers, 'The Hidden Economy of Dockland Families: Liverpool in the 1930s', in Pat Hudson and W. R. Lee (eds.), *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester, 1990).

[52] Giles, *Parlour and Suburb*, 72–82; Alison Light, *Forever England: Feminism, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991), 120, 219.

[53] Delap, 'Patsy Pancake to Mrs Mopp'.

[54] Giles, *Parlour and Suburb*, 70–2; Judy Giles, '"A Little Strain with Servants": Gender, Modernity and Domesticity in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Celia Fremlin's *The Seven Chars of Chelsea*', *Literature and History*, xii (2003); Delap, 'Patsy Pancake to Mrs Mopp'.

[55] Ministry of Reconstruction, *Domestic Service*, 2.

clearly unsure: 'Was I a visitor still, so that she should show me in? Or was I already a servant, so that she should go in first herself?'[56]

This portrayal of service has a great deal of merit, demonstrating as it does the challenges that being an employer posed. Yet it begs the question: if employing servants was so traumatic, why bother? Giles and Light have both suggested that lack of alternatives was a problem before the 1950s made domestic appliances and part-time cleaners readily available.[57] Giles argues that the 'modern' middle-class home was already conceived as one without servants by the 1930s, and that the eventual decline of live-in service was due to this cultural development.[58] But by the late 1930s, most middle-class householders could afford, and procure, labour-saving devices. Ownership, however, remained very low. Just 4 per cent of British households possessed a washing machine in 1939.[59] Many preferred to squeeze a servant into a boxroom, and put up both with constant uncertainty about whether she would leave and with the need to cope with her constant presence. The increase in domestic servants between the 1921 and 1931 censuses, coupled with press reports of a servant 'shortage', suggest that demand for servants rose.[60] In 1937, an investigation undertaken by the Ministry of Education concluded 'that the shortage of servants must be due to a largely increased demand rather than to a decrease in the supply'.[61] This indicates that servants were primarily employed because their labour made daily life so much easier for the middle and upper classes. As Winifred Foley commented, employers were quite happy to put up with minor inconveniences and irritations in order to secure and retain 'a creature that would run on very little fuel and would not question her lot'.[62]

As this suggests, prescriptive literature and light-hearted studies such as Fremlin's provide much less insight into domestic service than into middle-class anxieties about status and power.

[56] Celia Fremlin, *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* (London, 1940), 23–4.
[57] Light, *Forever England*, 219.
[58] Giles, *Parlour and Suburb*, 68.
[59] Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, 'Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain since the 1920s', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xlvii (1994), 745; T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1700–2000* (Harmondsworth, 2000), 243–5.
[60] *Women's Leader*, 5 Mar. 1924, 6; Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 68–9.
[61] PRO, ED 11/278.
[62] Foley, *Forest Trilogy*, 140.

Partly, this was manifested in concern about the expanding lower middle class, their alacrity in assuming the role of employer and their eagerness to wield economic power, whether or not the established middle class considered them fit for such roles. More important, however, was middle-class concern about growing working-class aspirations.

The primary reason for the 'servant problem' was, in the words of the *Daily Mail*, young working-class women's 'restless desire for independence, which is a legacy of the war'.[63] The enfranchisement of the working class (men in 1918 and women in 1928) stimulated optimism about the rise of a more homogeneous and affluent society — but also exacerbated fear of working-class independence.[64] Adrian Bingham rightly points out that parliamentary anxiety over the extension of the franchise to all women over twenty-one centred not on upper-class 'flappers' but on working-class women.[65] Servants were symbols of a new type of working-class femininity: mass-produced, fashionable clothes and cosmetics were readily available to them during the interwar decades. When Mrs Cleary bobbed her hair during the mid 1920s, her disgusted mistress 'said "Now you look what you are, a common little slavey." Well I just turned round and walked out of the room'.[66] Of course, what Mrs Cleary's mistress really detested was the independence that this haircut signified. This also helps to explain other invasions of maids' privacy in the interwar years. Mrs Halliday's mistress regularly read her letters; many servants were expected to eat alone in cramped kitchens.[67] Such rules were not new to the 1920s and 1930s. Nineteenth-century legal and press depictions of the working class that emphasized 'immaturity and potential viciousness'[68] did not disappear in the first decades of the twentieth century, but the focus of the fury had changed.

[63] Cited in Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press*, 68–9.

[64] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920–60* (Manchester, 2000), 53–4.

[65] Adrian Bingham, '"Stop the Flapper Vote Folly": Lord Rothermere, the *Daily Mail*, and the Equalization of the Franchise, 1927–28', *Twentieth Century Brit. Hist.*, xiii (2002).

[66] TLSL, MSTC, no. 28.

[67] *Ibid.*; LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088. For similar examples, see Nottingham Local Studies Library (hereafter NLSL), Making Ends Meet oral history collection, A78/a–c/1; '9 Hour Day for Servants in City's Charter', *Cardiff Morning Post*, 7 May 1937, 3.

[68] Paul Johnson, 'Class Law in Victorian England', *Past and Present*, no. 141 (Nov. 1993), 155.

Of course relations between servants and employers were not always antagonistic. Many servants emulated their employers' lifestyles and retrospectively rationalized their work as 'training' for marriage and motherhood. Lily Blenkin, the daughter of a skilled manual worker, became a servant at the age of twelve during the 1900s. In an interview seventy years later she believed that she had learned a lot from her employers' lifestyle, which was 'better than mine'.[69] This did not end with the outbreak of war. Edith Edwards, like most women who entered service after the First World War, felt that 'there was always a stigma' attached to domestic service. Yet she also concurred with her mother's opinion:

> you saw another side of life . . . living with educated people — you . . . you sort of self-taught — and of course there was always a good library in all the houses . . . I mean I can tell people that have been in very good service . . . by the way they do things, and if they talk about cooking.[70]

Such emulation was complex and contradictory: it was often used to rationalize disappointment and thwarted aspiration. Lily Blenkin commented that 'if I'd been better at school — you know — I might have gone in for something more than domestic service'.[71]

At times, emulation could cause transgressions of class and gender boundaries. Before the 1920s, servants had been able to move between jobs fairly easily — they had been able to break their contract without too much difficulty since the 1875 Master and Workmen Act. Most, however, could not hope to leave service except by marrying, and this shaped their responses to it. Servants might gossip about their employers, or wear their mistresses' clothes (as had the maids Walter Blackman had known in the London of the 1900s), or take tea in the drawing room when their employer was out, 'to get above it', like Mrs Bairnson in Edwardian Edinburgh.[72] Such actions remind us that class-consciousness was formed by a sense of exclusion as well as inclusion.[73] All these actions were significant enough in making employers anxious or wary; they could sometimes be used as tools for negotiation.

[69] Qualidata, FLWE, no. 226.
[70] TLSL, MSTC, no. 36. See also LRO, NWSA, 1999.0060.
[71] Qualidata, FLWE, no. 226.
[72] Qualidata, FLWE, nos. 96, 156.
[73] Johnson, 'Class Law in Victorian England', 154–6.

It is also important to recognize that these practices were carried out by the same women who expressed some affection for their employers, or acknowledged the material benefits they received as workers. Such women felt able to acknowledge these different dimensions of their relationship with employers when, years later, they composed their life histories. These women offer a more complex account of working-class identity than that suggested either by the cultural historians who focus on positive memories of service, or by those sociologists keen to find defiance behind the deferential mask; but, ultimately, their actions did not threaten service. Their life histories support Andy Wood's assertion that deference and defiance coexist, and that the former is not simply a veneer behind which 'authentic' social relations lurk, but a response to subordination that 'impaired workers' senses of themselves, and could thereby undermine collective agency'.[74]

I nonetheless distance myself from Wood's argument that the coexistence of 'deference *with* defiance' results in appallingly debilitating 'hidden injuries of class'.[75] Most servants left their posts at the first possible opportunity, whether for a different kind of job or for marriage — and this included women who really enjoyed aspects of their job, such as good relations with a mistress or material benefits like plentiful food. The fundamental transition in the representation and treatment of servants, from the 'old faithful' or household help, to a sly interloper into middle-class life, was brought about by young working-class women. By the mid 1930s they were voting with their feet and leaving service — or scorning to enter it in the first place. Servants became more assertive in requesting wage increases as demand for their labour increasingly outstripped supply.[76] Eileen Balderson, who entered

[74] Andy Wood, 'Fear, Hatred and the Hidden Injuries of Class in Early Modern England', *Jl Social Hist.*, xxxix (2006); Andy Wood, 'Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency in a Yorkshire Valley, *c.*1596–1615', *Past and Present*, no. 193 (Nov. 2006). Although Wood's brilliant analysis is concerned with early modern England, his insights are extremely valuable for historians of twentieth-century Britain.

[75] This does not undermine or challenge Wood's formidable interpretation of early modern society. My contention is that injury is overemphasized at the expense of agency in Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1972), an otherwise outstanding study of social relations in America upon which Wood draws.

[76] Ministry of Labour, *Second Interim Report of the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment for the Period Ending Dec. 31st 1922* (London, 1923); Ministry

(cont. on p. 198)

service in the 1920s, stressed that 'Exploitation applied much more to other workers . . . There was no need for a girl to stay where conditions were poor'.[77] In 1936, after three years in service at a large country house, Marion Kent informed her mistress that she intended to take a better-paid job with the neighbouring landowner unless she received a wage rise. Her employer 'was shocked and dismayed by me asking for this', but Marion was eventually offered, and accepted, a substantial increase in her earnings.[78] Kent was unusual; most women left the sector at the first opportunity. Few servants had remained in the occupation all their lives before the twentieth century, but the striking difference between the 1900s and the 1940s was that young women were increasingly able to leave service for better-paid work rather than for marriage.

This demonstrates that we need to take *detachment* from work as seriously as deference and defiance. The women who washed for and cleaned up after the middle and upper classes across the first half of the twentieth century felt themselves worthy of more — capable of a world view quite at odds with that of their employers. The emotional effects of work are important — it is at the very least demeaning to be made to eat alone in a cold kitchen; to be told you are 'common'; and/or to be directed to undertake hours of gruelling labour while your able-bodied mistress is idle. Even so, however, the feelings engendered are more limited than either employers or historians have wished to realize. In leaving service, women demonstrated that, for them, it was just a job — a way of getting by, making do, surviving. It is hard to mark time in this way, to see your life as a huge calendar, the days ticked off — that is why the consolations of a sympathetic employer, a nice room or plentiful food were important at the time and are often dwelt on in servants' memories. Few women, however, gave these things a second thought when the chance of a good marriage or a better job came along. Living for the weekend, for marriage or for retirement remains an important method of survival and endurance for many people. Rather than

(n. 76 cont.)
of Labour, *Report . . . into the Present Conditions as to the Supply of Female Domestic Servants*, 8.

[77] Eileen Balderson with Douglas Goodlad, *Backstairs Life in a Country House* (Newton Abbot, 1982), 13.

[78] LRO, NWSA, 1988.0060. See also Foley, *Forest Trilogy*, 126.

viewing this as a 'culture of consolation', we should recognize that a sense of detachment both highlights connections between these different spheres of daily life, and has helped to shape immense social changes.

The sense of detachment expressed by these servants links them to a very different section of the working class: the 'affluent workers' interviewed by Goldthorpe and others in 1960s Luton, and more recently studied by Mike Savage. The latter found that these male workers' aspirations to own their own home or business were prompted by a desire for independence, from both state and employer. As Savage argues, classed identities are therefore not inevitably undermined by the existence of 'rugged individualism'. He suggests that the roots of this are found in an older, artisan culture of autonomy.[79] The aspirations and actions of the servants studied here suggest that this culture affected young women as well as adult men. Servants' aspirations for autonomy found expression in individualistic strategies outside the organized labour movement, but were nonetheless perceived as antagonistic and threatening by many employers.

The result of the mounting exodus from service was not a wholesale improvement in servants' wages and working conditions, but middle-class outrage at their flagrant assertion of legal and political rights. As a recent Work Foundation study of domestic employment pointed out, the representation of domestic work as primarily a service forged through positive, emotive, bonds is 'an inaccuracy that a request for monetary recognition does not allow an employer to maintain'.[80] In the short term, many mistresses imposed draconian measures. Winifred Foley's employer refused to accept her notice. Mrs Halliday's mistress read her letters; her master 'passed me like dirt' in the hall of their three-bedroom house. Mrs Cleary was not the only maid to be grossly insulted by her employer.[81] An investigation of servants' conditions undertaken by Cardiff Labour Exchange in 1937 found that 'Maidservants were compelled to spend hours in cold,

[79] Goldthorpe *et al.*, *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*; Mike Savage, 'Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures', in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics*, ii, *The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–79* (London, 1999), 37.

[80] Work Foundation, *Domestics*, 19.

[81] Foley, *Child in the Forest*, 182; LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088; TLSL, MSTC, no. 28. For similar examples, see NLSL, Making Ends Meet oral history collection, A78/a–c/1.

comfortless rooms and their privacy was not respected'.[82] These actions seem borne of fury and antagonism, rather than anxiety and insecurity.

Even more 'enlightened' employers could not contemplate regulation or improved conditions. During the 1940s, irreconcilable demands emerged for a domestic workforce that would be both professional and unregulated. These demands were articulated most forcefully by feminists Violet Markham and Florence Hancock, who headed an inquiry into post-war domestic service. In 1944, their *Report* recommended the establishment of a National Institute of Housework and condemned the worst features of pre-war servant life. However (and here they parted company with contributors from the trade unions and the Co-operative Women's Guild), they stressed that no regulation should be imposed on servants' employers; the 'special feature' of the 'personal relationship' between mistress and servant would be undermined by such interference, and, anyway, 'Hours . . . and conditions of work will necessarily vary with the household'.[83] The *Report* implied that an ideal servant was both an automaton who worked professionally for little reward, and a companion able to offer care and support. This, of course, was a dilemma that employers had wrestled with for decades (and still do), but it was soon rendered redundant by the Attlee government's withdrawal of support for the Institute and, more forcefully, by the exodus of young women out of service. By the 1950s, potential employers had to turn to the colonies and to European refugees, and to the more limited assistance offered by married charwomen.

IV

Fear of, or anxiety over, servants *was* present in middle-class homes between 1900 and 1950, but this was due to the difficulty in defining and asserting middle-class women's authority. Giles states that 'the middle-class wife was the conduit' for her husband's exercise of power within the home.[84] Peter Lewis recalled of his childhood that 'a maid might be summoned to the table [by Lewis's father] so that my mother (it was she, at his insistence,

[82] '9 Hour Day for Servants in City's Charter', 3.
[83] Violet Markham and Florence Hancock, *Report on the Postwar Organisation of Private Domestic Employment* (London, 1944), 4, 6.
[84] Giles, *Parlour and Suburb*, 75.

who had to fulfil this role) could point out some fault *he* had found in cooking or place-setting'.[85] Consequently (as has been concluded in a Brazilian context), 'for the maids *the oppressors are their mistresses*, not their masters'.[86] In many servants' testimonies, resentment is directed at mistresses: it was a *woman* who inspected Mrs Bairnson's room in 1914;[87] forbade Isabella Anderson to use gaslight in 1912;[88] and read Mrs Halliday's letters in 1935.[89] Yet, as Lewis's account suggests, a middle-class woman's household management did not detract from her husband's authority; rather, her role was to 'soften' and 'humanize' his male authority, and to act as its instrument within the home.[90] Julia Filet-Abreu de Souza's study of the expansion of domestic service among Brazil's middle class in the 1980s concurs. She notes that 'the roles played by the mistress and her "other face" (the servant) are fundamentally defined in relation to one man: the husband, the master'.[91] This could in turn undermine middle-class mistresses' claim to full womanhood. Mrs Lambert recalled with pride that her (male) employer spoke of her as '"a second mother to my children"'.[92]

The keeping of servants enabled middle-class women to lead increasingly independent lives without challenging the sexual and class divisions of labour. Self-consciously emancipated women like Virginia Woolf and Vera Brittain raised the question of how women could combine love and work, domesticity and citizenship — but ultimately they felt unable to create 'a penurious but unhumiliating independence in Bloomsbury' without the domestic assistance of working-class women.[93]

The quandary over what constituted emancipated womanhood found its way into middlebrow literature; it is vividly explored

[85] Peter M. Lewis, 'Mummy, Matron and the Maids: Feminine Presence and Absence in Male Institutions, 1934–1963', in Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds.), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991), 173.

[86] Julia Filet-Abreu de Souza, 'Paid Domestic Service in Brazil', *Latin American Perspectives*, vii (1980), 54.

[87] Qualidata, FLWE, Mrs Bairnson.

[88] M. C. Scott Moncrieff, *Yes, Ma'am! Glimpses of Domestic Service, 1901–51* (Edinburgh, 1984), 74.

[89] LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088.

[90] Lewis, 'Mummy, Matron and the Maids', 174.

[91] Filet-Abreu de Souza, 'Paid Domestic Service in Brazil', 52.

[92] Qualidata, FLWE, 15.

[93] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, intro. Mark Bostridge (London, 2004), 500.

in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night*.[94] The story's protagonist is Harriet Vane, a young crime novelist struggling to reconcile the conflicting demands of love, work and independence, who is called upon to solve a sabotage campaign directed against her Oxford women's college. The culprit is a servant — initially unsuspected because of the maids' ubiquity and the dons' fear that responsibility lies with a female academic warped by the 'unnaturalness' of scholarly spinsterdom. As the culprit herself tells the dons, '"There's nothing in your books about life and marriage and children is there? . . . You can't do anything for yourselves"'.[95] The novel sympathetically explores middle-class suspicion of servants. The maid's subservience is a mask, behind which lies a 'grotesque', contemptuous 'animal'.[96] In dealing with the danger of separating emotional and domestic life from the pursuit of a career, the novel also questions how far middle-class women could find economic and emotional fulfilment while the sexual division of labour — facilitated by domestic service — continued.

The desire for greater domestic privacy became an increasingly dominant theme in writing by and for middle-class women in the 1930s, a sentiment that Alison Light links to a growing wish to be rid of the scrutiny of servants.[97] Nevertheless, the presence of servants endured after the Second World War, due to continued middle-class demand for private assistance with domestic work and childcare. The tensions in the relationship between mistress and maid have also continued. Filet-Abreu de Souza cites one Brazilian middle-class woman who commented in the 1980s: '[I] had to fire my maid who had been working here for five years; she was taking over the house, the children listened more to her than to myself'.[98] In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper in 2005, Debra Ollivier articulated a similar angst. She claimed to 'care deeply' for the nanny she employed to facilitate her own paid work, but simultaneously felt 'growing suspicion and distrust' of her employee's vital role in the household. She eventually sacked the nanny, reinstating her as a part-time cleaner.[99]

[94] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London, 1935).
[95] *Ibid.*, 428.
[96] *Ibid.*, 429, 426.
[97] Light, *Forever England*, 219.
[98] Filet-Abreu de Souza, 'Paid Domestic Service in Brazil', 52.
[99] Debra Ollivier, 'Jealous Love', *Guardian*, 1 June 2005, sect. 2, p. 8.

These middle-class women's fear that their maids could *replace* them is based on the continued alignment of domesticity with femininity, which their own support for privatized childcare and domestic labour has helped to maintain. This has emphasized the sanctity of the individual female as carer and domestic provider — and in so doing, has placed huge pressure on women across the social classes. Consequently, domestic work and childcare remain defined as unskilled drudgery, but neglecting these tasks is to fail as a wife, as a mother, and as a woman.

* * *

Domestic service was central to the negotiations over modern social relations that shaped the first half of Britain's twentieth century. Service was, and remains, an important component of modern class relations, and the tensions evident within it are a reminder that class, as well as gender and race, are essential considerations for studies of modernity. Domestic service reminds us that work does not consist solely of commodity production. It also demonstrates that class, gender and race are best understood as dynamic, intertwined relationships. Further research on the importance of race within domestic service — particularly in the period after 1945 — would be extremely valuable.

Workplace relationships — and class relations — are not inevitably characterized by 'deference' or 'defiance'. What Wood has called 'the coexistence of deference *with* defiance' shaped servants' experiences of work, and their life history narratives, which are of course intimately connected and shape a sense of self. This coexistence can be properly understood, however, only by accepting the importance of people's detachment from their labour. Servants' world view encompassed more than their employment, and this provided some defence against the injuries — hidden or otherwise — of class. In a period when the organized labour movement was negotiating a significant, but limited, role within the modern capitalist state, this particular assertion of agency has been overlooked — but it is deserving of serious attention. A sense of detachment from their labour made it possible for women to separate the demeaning nature of domestic service (defined thus by themselves, as well as by society at large) from their sense of self. This enabled them to extract value and meaning from the often lengthy period of their lives spent in service.

Yet simultaneously, they were able to desire, plan and enact their departure from the sector to provide a different, better life for their daughters — albeit one constrained by the class and gender inequalities that detachment negotiated, but did not fundamentally challenge.

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